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12. THE OLIVE KEELBACK (*ATRETIUM SCHISTOSUM* RUSSELL) FEEDING ON MOSQUITO LARVAE

At the Madras Snake Park several local species of snakes are kept in a large natural-foliage enclosure surrounded by a 4 ft cement wall and moat. Frogs, mice and lizards are put in as food but the Olive Keelback supplements its diet by actively hunting and feeding on mosquito larvae, probably *Culex* sp., average length 10 mm. We observed 300 mm long keelbacks swimming slowly along the smooth, algae choked bottom and sides of the water moat. Occasionally lowering or bending its head to the side while swimming, the snake disturbed the algae and invariably several larvae would shoot out in their odd jerky way. The Keelback would then grab at the larvae with its characteristic sideways bending jab we have observed it using on frogs. The larva is swallowed with a few quick 'chews'. One specimen observed continuously for 25 minutes caught an average of 17 larvae per 5 minute period and we estimated that only 10% of the snake's jabs were failures. Larger specimens (i.e. females) have not been observed catching larvae.

Considering bio-mass, this feeding behaviour seems a bit impractical. There are other snakes which regularly feed on invertebrates but usually it is of a more logical size relationship, for instance, the Saw-scaled Viper (*Echis carinatus*) feeding on the large black scorpion *Heterometrus* sp. The snakes observed were not in an emaciated state so we consider this to be the normal feeding behaviour of the Olive Keelback, exhibiting a modified frog hunting technique combined with very good close vision and accuracy. Very little is known about the feeding habits of Indian serpents.

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